Olympism: Education Transcript

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Olympism: Education

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In the first lecture of three, I outlined the difference between the Olympics - whose focus of interest is on a two-week festival of sport held once in every four years between elite athletes representing their countries or city-states in inter-communal competition - and the philosophy of Olympism, whose focus of interest is not just the elite athlete, but everyone; not just a short truce period, but the whole of life; not just competition and winning, but also the values of participation and co-operation; not just sport as an activity, but also as a formative and developmental influence contributing to desirable characteristics of individual personality and social life.

It is a vision of the ethical and educational potential of sport. As we saw last time, Olympism emphasises the role of sport in both personal development and social development.

This commitment to Olympism and Olympic Education is foregrounded in all official publications, because it is what makes Olympic events distinctive, against all other world championships. For example, in the Olympic Charter (June 2011, http://www.olympic.org/Documents/olympic_charter_en.pdf), the section on the Olympic Movement (p. 13) declares: “The goal of the Olympic Movement is to contribute to building a peaceful and better world by educating youth through sport practised in accordance with Olympism and its values.” The section on the International Olympic Committee (p. 14) begins: “The mission of the IOC is to promote Olympism throughout the world and to lead the Olympic Movement.” The section on the International Sports Federations acknowledges their role in regulating and developing sport, and then declares their responsibility to “contribute to the achievement of the goals set out in the Olympic Charter, in particular by way of the spread of Olympism and Olympic education.”

Section 27, on the role of the NOCs, gives as the prime aim: to promote the fundamental principles and values of Olympism in their countries, in particular, in the fields of sport and education, by promoting Olympic educational programmes in all levels of schools, sports and physical education institutions and universities, as well as by encouraging the creation of institutions dedicated to Olympic education, such as National Olympic Academies, Olympic Museums and other programmes, including cultural, related to the Olympic Movement.

So the official rhetoric is at pains to prioritise and emphasise the ethical and educational basis of the Olympic Movement, and exhorts all responsible authorities to take practical steps to realise its vision and mission.

Our question is: How successful are they in meeting our legitimate expectations of them? Now, I won’t have time to examine all the various players here, but as a first clue as to the answer that I would offer if I had the time, I will extend this challenge: can you find any effort or initiative anywhere by any IF that mentions Olympic Education (and this is despite the fact that some IFs, such as football and athletics, have an automatic seat on the IOC)?

But, before I get going on that, a word on sport, competition and education.

A word on “sport”
It’s not anything or everything that can be called ‘sport’ that has the power to be educative. This is the feature of Olympic-style sport that distinguished it from, for example, world championship sport. De Coubertin made this distinction by challenging us to choose between the fair (the agora, the market-place) and the temple (ethical ideals and the intrinsic values of sport) – see Martinkova 2012).

A word on “competitive”
Some people take ‘competitive’ sport to mean only ‘performance-sport’, or ‘quantitative’ sport, or ‘record-sport’– those sports that admit of the ‘objective’ measurement of quantities, such as time, height and distance in running (and other forms of racing), jumping, and throwing. This problematises the so-called ‘aesthetic’ sports, which rely on ‘subjective’ judgement for deciding the winner. It often goes unnoticed that it also problematises, although in a different way, ‘qualitative’ sports such as team games, where judgements are made throughout the game, including on whether a goal is actually scored.

Now, whereas there was some evidence that De Coubertin preferred quantitative sport to others (saying, for example, that team games were not central Olympic activities), I think that his main requirement for ethical sport stemmed from the idea of strife in honourable competition. So, for our purposes, these worries need not detain us further: the essence of Olympic sport is ethical/competition, and this is what produces personal and social goods. So we return to the foundational idea of Olympism: ethical sport as an educative influence.

Olynpism and ethics will be the theme of my third lecture, but I do need to give some examples of ethical issues here, to be explored more fully next time.

Ethical issues – the example of doping
Why have there been public panics about sports doping? The usual answers are that doping is harmful, or unnatural, or illegal, or gives an advantage. I shall contend that none of these is a good reason for banning...
The restriction of access to goods by all except high enough spenders. The problem will not be addressed until it is ethically balanced, and the Olympic Games is precisely the kind of motivation we need to ethically balance the problems of sport, so that they can be oriented towards educational solutions.

Ethical issues – the example of gambling:
Jacques Rogge has called gambling the greatest threat to modern sport. (Gambling is the new doping!) Next time I shall discuss the scandal of the non-prosecution of Matt Le Tissier and Karl Froch, who have both publicly admitted to attempted ‘spot-fixing’ while competing at the highest levels. There is a two-fold wrong here: gambling-fraud and sports-fraud. The first is a criminal offence, whereas the second (which ought to be! – on the ground that it defrauds others of the benefits of victory), just like doping, reneges on the contract to contest, and threatens the very existence of sport (cp. cricketers banned for spot-fixing).

So it’s not just sport, and not just competitive sport – but ethical/competitive sport – with which Olympism is concerned. This means that we need to look again at the ethical basis of sport – participating and competing not for material gain, but for intrinsic values and satisfactions. This is, after all, what 98% of sports participation is about – elite professional sport being a very small fraction of total sports participation.

Ethical issues – the example of amateurism:
This idea that extrinsic goals are liable to deflect us from our ethical trajectory was at the root of the earlier Olympic commitment to amateurism. If we play sport in pursuit of its intrinsic goods we are less likely to stain this quest with questionable means, into which external goods (such as fame and fortune) might tempt us – because we would be besmirching the very thing that we have chosen to do. However, this is not just a sporting problem – rather it presents a problem throughout life. True, athletes might be corrupted into doping and diving and fouling in their desperate attempts to win prizes; but businessmen, too, might be tempted away from ethical business practice and into corrupt means to maximise their profits or save their businesses. In so doing, of course, they make a dirty business of their own chosen business, and of themselves.

A word on “education”
Which also requires some elucidation in this context. Often it is used to mean ‘giving information about’ or ‘instruction in’ some specifics, or ‘giving advice about’ something – for example, anti-doping advice. Some of this might even amount to propaganda, or indoctrination – ask, for example, what is the difference between health promotion and health education. All of the above stand in stark contrast to a more general idea of education which sees its task as the development of personal attributes and qualities.

So, what is Olympic Education?
Often, it is thought that some of the tasks of Olympic Education are information-giving: to make people more aware of the Olympic Games, the structure of the Olympic Movement, and perhaps some of the ideals espoused and problems encountered. But there are those of us who believe that Olympism could well make a major additional impact to the school curriculum on a much broader front.

I go to my doctor for medical information and advice. But what he gives me (and for which I thank him) is not medical education – it is ‘merely’ information and advice. In the same way, information and advice for athletes, no matter how well presented and useful, does not amount to Olympic Education, which has to do with the lifetime development of the whole person through engagement with sport, by learning the lessons that sport teaches, in regard to the values of Olympism.

Possibilities for action
There are lots of things that could be done - firstly, from ‘knowledge transfer’ – by following the example of good things that others have done before, such as:

Sydney 2000 – an excellent website with materials, information and ideas for teachers.

Athens 2004 – penetration of the national curriculum with additional PE and extra ‘Olympic’ classes, with 3,000 new PE teachers employed.

Beijing 2008 – a complete revision of the values education curriculum at the national level, placing ‘sport, movement, action’ as one of 3 focal areas - improved provision for moral education through ethical engagement in sport.

The IOC’s OVEP programme – Olympic Values and Education Programme.

So far as I can see, the LOCOG Olympic Education Programme consists of a commissioned website, called Get Set, on the Sydney model of 12 years ago, and schools are encouraged to register with the website. There are ideas and materials for teachers to use in planning their lessons with Olympic themes and motifs. Despite the claim that LOCOG has been ‘working closely’ with DfE, I can find little evidence of engagement with DfE, whose website does not mention the Olympics apart from references back to Get Set. (For example, there is listed an
evaluation study on schools’ and colleges’ engagement with London 2012, commissioned from TNS-BRMB, which sees itself as evaluating the impact of Get Set.)

However, I cannot find evidence of any other examples followed or lessons learned from previous Games. Nor can I find any substantial or productive engagement with the PE profession, the National Curriculum, the National Olympic Academy, or the Olympic Study and Research Centre in Loughborough. This has to be seen as a disappointment – as a great Olympic Education opportunity missed.

Secondly, we were not bereft of good ideas from examples of what has been done in Britain in the past:

1. A National Olympic Academy - we had one for over 20 years - between 1988 and 2009. But it was closed down in the run-up to the Games. Compare this with the regional organisation of the Cultural Olympiad, and the money spent on its administration and its activities. There have been some wonderful artistic and cultural initiatives and adventures during this Olympiad – but I think we can ask the question: Why didn’t we have an Olympic Educational Olympiad, too? Just think what might have been achieved for PE and Sport in education, if conceived of (and funded as) an Educational Olympiad, with the motivation and impetus of London 2012.

2. BOA Education Committee - The BOA also used to have an Education Committee – on which I proudly served 25 years ago with such luminaries as Peter McIntosh, Jim Biddle and Sandy Duncan. Despite the large number of committees in existence, the BOA no longer has an Education Committee, and no longer seeks to draw in educational expertise from amongst professional ranks in Britain. Imagine if this were the case with its Medical Committee!

3. The National Education System - NOCs are exhorted to provide for institutions to develop Olympic Education. That would include a NOA, but also activity in schools and colleges. There is presently no engagement of which I am aware, outside of the Get Set website.

4. Connections with Culture - De Coubertin was keen to see the connection of sport with other cultural forms, and the BOA has engaged in the past with, for example, art competitions in British Schools. LOCOG addressed this area as Culture and Education, and instituted a Cultural Olympiad. We await the assessment commissioned from Beatriz Garcia, but my impression is that a lot of money was spent on a regionally organised 4-year programme of artistic and cultural events (nothing wrong with that!), most of which saw themselves as Olympic in no sense at all, apart from in the sense that their activities took place during the XXX Olympiad. Too frequently, there has been no attempt to connect art and culture to sport or to ideas of Olympism - just the selection, organising and promoting of cultural events. (There are some notable exceptions, such as the “I-move” programme in Yorkshire.)

Ceremonies are a part of ‘culture’, and an extra £45m was found last month at the highest level of government, in order to “advertise Britain”. Nothing wrong with that – money well spent, in my view. But just think what might have been achieved in terms of an Olympic educational legacy for the British population with a tiny fraction of the huge sums devoted to Culture and Ceremonies.

Structural Issue
One explanation for some of the above inactivity might be related to a salient structural issue. When the Olympic Games is awarded to a city, the OCOG assumes certain responsibilities, including a contractual duty to make some provision for Olympic education. There is then a danger that the NOC will step aside, and fail to play its key role in pursuing its Charter mission, instead delegating it to the OCOG. However, this leaves a massive hostage to the future - what happens when the LOCOG goes home? Who is going to continue with this activity, when there are no structures or plans in place?

So far as I can see, to repeat this: LOCOG has commissioned a website, called Get Set, on the Sydney model, for teachers to access for ideas and materials. But I cannot find evidence of any other lessons learned from previous Games. Nor can I find evidence of significant engagement with DfE, the PE profession, the National Curriculum, the National Olympic Academy, or the Olympic Study and Research Centre in Loughborough.

This structural issue is related to a failure on the part of the IOC to be explicit about what it thinks Olympic education to be, and what it expects OCOGs to do, or at least to try to do. There appear to be limited conceptions at work within the IOC itself, a body that might be presumed to have a special interest in a clear and robust idea of Olympic Education, and firm recommendations for good practice. Instead, just as one recent example, consider the IOC Olympic Congress 2009 Education section, and its ‘recommendations’, which are all about ‘information’-giving and advice. But, as we noted above, information and advice for athletes, no matter how useful, does not amount to Olympic Education. The fact that the 2009 Congress Report uses the word education only with respect to such limited functions indicates the poverty of its conception of ‘education’.

So what has actually been done by LOCOG?
It may be that the above is too negative a view of what has actually been accomplished by LOCOG, so let me attempt a review of activity to date.

Get Set
As noticed above, LOCOG commissioned the Get Set website, as meeting its contractual obligation to make
provision for Olympic Education. Schools and colleges may sign up on the website, and may also become ‘partners’, which encourages greater involvement, and offers opportunities for benefits, such as tickets for the Games. However, it is rather surprising that there seems to have been no take-up of the IOC OVEP initiative as at least part of the provision. A DfE evaluation study has provided early statistics as to take-up, attitudes and effects.

However, a website doesn’t actually do anything. It just sits there as a resource, just like books on a shelf, requiring human actors to initiate change in schools. In Athens and Beijing we saw materials, training, new staff, investment, engagement with the PE profession and the national PE curriculum – at least some of which are essential for real change. There has been nothing like this in Britain.

Podium
Podium is a website for FE and HE engagement in matters Olympic, with information on who is doing what in terms of hosting visiting teams, running local activities, etc. It is a way of ‘collecting’ and representing work being done. However, Podium doesn’t actually do anything itself, either, towards Olympic Education in FE and HE. (This should not be seen as a criticism of Podium – which seems to be doing well what it was set up to do.)

Inspire
Collecting others’ activity? Inspire-badging?

Research
On 3 Feb 2012 there was a DCMS conference on Researching the Olympics (see Podium website).

This is a meta-evaluation of a range of evaluations of Olympics-related projects (participation rates, etc). This is another expensive ‘research’ study, providing employment for empirical scientists producing quantitative data. So far as I can see, there is no mention of knowledge and research on Olympism, or on education. As I understand it, £1m was awarded to private company Grant Thornton for this study, which I am morally certain well exceeds the total LOCOC budget for Olympic Education activities.

Olympic Study and Research Centre
The OSRC is based at Loughborough University, and co-administered by the BOA. In an Olympic year, especially with the Games held in Britain, we might expect to see in evidence some activity or work relating to Olympism and education. However, no activities or events have been organised for the British - no research projects, no conferences, no speakers for the last 2 years - although it will stage a special two-day event for Olympic Study Centres, to which representatives of the world’s OSCs are traditionally invited.

When first envisaged, during a series of meetings at the BOA involving senior sports academics from around Britain, this Centre was seen as a national network of those interested in teaching and research in the area of Olympic Studies – as a step towards fulfilling the NOC’s mission as set out in the Olympic Charter, and in its own publications. Now, however, it is at best merely a stalled lecture series, and an advert for attracting doctoral students to Loughborough. It is another opportunity missed.

Olympic Legacy
For most people, ‘legacy’ is code for urban infrastructural change, especially of the kind that transformed Barcelona and Athens, and this will clearly be a major gain also for East London. It is worth reminding ourselves that, when people complain about the cost of the Games, they don’t always distinguish the cost of the Games themselves from the costs of urban development. However, I think it is generally accepted that infrastructural renewal in East London was required in any case - indeed that it was long overdue - and would not have happened so soon without the motivation of London 2012. Sometimes this is referred to as ‘economic and social’ legacy.

Similarly, ‘sports legacy’ is often code for sports infrastructure (buildings, facilities, etc), although sometimes it also used to refer to increased sports participation. These two meanings converge in the expectation of and requirement for ‘legacy use’ of Olympic sports facilities. Some use or other for these facilities is a better outcome than the white elephant scenario so feared by critics, but surely a new facility that that finds an appropriate on-use that in some way promotes sport development must be the favoured outcome.

However, I don’t think that we have yet covered the notion of ‘Olympic Legacy’. What I mean by legacy (and what Olympism must see as legacy) includes all the above - but also an educational and ethical legacy. This is what would make the legacy an ‘Olympic’ legacy. This could take many different forms, such as: revitalising PE; reconsidering the role of PE, sport and other practical and cultural pursuits in the life of a pupil; re-engineering the role of PE and sport in schools and communities; re-focussing and re-theorising possibilities for moral education, especially through sport and so on. But I can find no discussion of this at all. Even the School Sports initiative, now downgraded by the present government, and criticised by Tessa Jowell, is just an elite sports competition. This is agora, not temple – it is the model of Olympic Sport seen as World Championships – not of Olympic sport seen under the aspect of Olympism.

If we ask: what has been the legacy impact on Physical Education or moral education in British schools? - the answer must be: close to zero. This is all very disappointing. It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity spurned.
Conclusion
As we said at the start, Olympism is a vision of the ethical and educational potential of sport, emphasising the possible role of sport as a means to both personal development and social development. PE teachers and sports coaches, working in thousands of schools and clubs around the country, are key to any development. I believe that PE (and playing in a local club) is (or, rather, could be and should be) a kind of Olympic Education, because Olympism gives grounds for teachers and coaches:

(a) To further their traditional concern for the whole child whilst working at the levels both of activity and of ideas (because the practical work can be seen as a kind of laboratory for the value experiments of the children)

(b) To show coherence between approaches to practical and theoretical work (because the physical activity is an example of the Olympic ideas in practice)

(c) To explore in upper years ideas implicit in work in lower years (because the practical work which encapsulates the ideas can be taught well before the children are old enough to understand the full intellectual content of the ideas).

I would wish to commend to teachers and coaches the principles and practice of Olympism - not just as inert ideas to be passed on to their pupils, but as living ideas which have the power to remake our notions of sport in education.

The opportunity presented by the London 2012 Games should have been the ideal opportunity to promote Olympic Education, but the chance has been lost through an inadequate conception of (the aims of) education, inadequate investment in any means except a website, inadequate collaboration with professional organisations, and inadequate support and funding for training and development.

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